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Written By [Guest User](#)

An interview with Roy Diblik by **Partice Peltier** - Published in the **August 2007** Edition of [*American Nurseryman*](#)



There's no such thing as a "no-maintenance" garden -but one plantsman has developed a clever way to design and install beautiful and sustainable landscapes with a reliable budget for time as well as resources.

Roy Diblik is a man on a mission. He'd like everyone - from green industry professionals to backyard hobbyists - to become Know Maintenance™ gardeners.

A teacher, author, plantsman and garden design consultant, Diblik takes issue with the prevalence of what he calls "carpet planting": masses of roses, daylilies, rudbeckia or sedum routinely used in both commercial and residential settings. This approach creates a day-to-day

sameness, not to mention plant health problems promoted by the lack of diversity, he asserts. Maintaining an array of plants chosen without regard for each species' demands for deadheading, pruning, cutting back and dividing is a recipe for failure, he says, adding, "You can maintain any combination if you have all the time in the world, but how many of us have that luxury?"

"Enough"

says Diblik, co-owner of Northwind Perennial Farm in Burlington, WI

A "New" Approach

This avid plantsman has developed an approach to gardening for professionals and amateurs alike, and it's one designed to make the most of the plant tenders' time and resources, as well as the plants' various attributes. A well-planned and -planted landscape doesn't have to mean untold hours of arduous maintenance, according to Diblik. With the right approach, the time and energy spent on regular maintenance can be established long before the first plant is installed. Thus, Know Maintenance™ gardening.

Inspired by native plant communities, he advocates selecting plants with compatible cultural requirements and weaving them together using filler plants instead of mulch. "Too often," Diblik says, "we just put plants in the ground and hope to God they grow."

"How many thousands of astilbes have you seen all dried out and brown because the site isn't moist enough?" Diblik asks. "How many Sedum 'Autumn Joy' have you seen that are floppy because the soil is too fertile? How many rudbeckias have you seen with leaf spot because they're planted in masses?"

This lack of knowledge about plants, their relationships to each other and to their environments sets up landscapes that are difficult to maintain. Often, plants must be replaced every few years due to disease, pests and stress.

Calculating Success



Diblik believes you can predict the longevity of a planting, as well as the amount of time and resources required to maintain it, based on a thorough understanding of the plants you select. "You can determine how much work you do based on the plants you choose," he explains. "You can determine what it will cost to maintain an area before you even put the plants in the ground," he says.

For a landscape professional, this technique offers the advantage of budgeting time - and time is money.

Instead of that disease-prone mass of rudbeckia, Diblik proposes a planting that's composed of 60 percent *Sporobolus* and 10 percent *Molinia caerulea* 'Moorflamme' with "moments" of rudbeckia.

Yellow-flowering *Allium flavum* bulbs provide spring color, followed by the purple flowers of *Allium pulchellum* in summer. In fall, if necessary, the entire area - except for the pockets of *Rudbeckia* - could be treated with a broadleaf herbicide to control weeds, he explains.

What does this combination accomplish? It replaces what Diblik characterizes as the typical cycle of "weed, woodchip and replace" with a long-lived planting that offers variety of forms, foliage and flowers requiring less weeding, mulching and watering - and reducing opportunity for disease. Plus, thanks to the diversity of species, insect or disease problems that do occur are likely to affect only a portion of the planting, further reducing replacement costs.

The Basics to Know Maintenance

The principles of Know Maintenance™ gardening are simple. And it's a concept that's easily adapted to any hardiness zone, any microclimate or any region in the country.

Start with durable plants that are willing to hang in there when conditions aren't "just so."

Blend them into naturalistic communities with other plants that have compatible cultural requirements and growth habits.

Create "layers" of plants to prevent weeds without covering the ground with mulch. (Diblik points out that he does, however, add a layer of organic matter to planting beds about every three years as additional nutrients are needed.)

Choose plants whose maintenance needs fit your time and materials "budget." Design, plant and maintain with sustainability as your goal.

Diblik's System incorporates three categories of plants, each of which serves a specific purpose within the design.



A Know Maintenance™ border provides a seamless transition between native prairie and cultivated residential landscape.

"Buddy" plants: "These are plants that will work with you," he says. "They're patient enough to stay with you until you learn how to take care of them." He chooses *Coreopsis verticillata* 'Golden Showers' over 'Moonbeam', for instance, because he's found it more adaptable to varying soil conditions. Similarly, he prefers *Salvia nemorosa* 'Wesuwe' over 'May Night' because it is the first of the salvias to bloom, the quickest to rebloom and doesn't require deadheading.

Native plants and their time-honored cultivars: Such as *Baptisia* x 'Purple Smoke', *Echinacea pallida*, *E. purpurea* 'Alba', *E. purpurea* 'Rubin Glow' and *Penstemon digitalis* 'Husker Red', are also among Diblik's buddies.

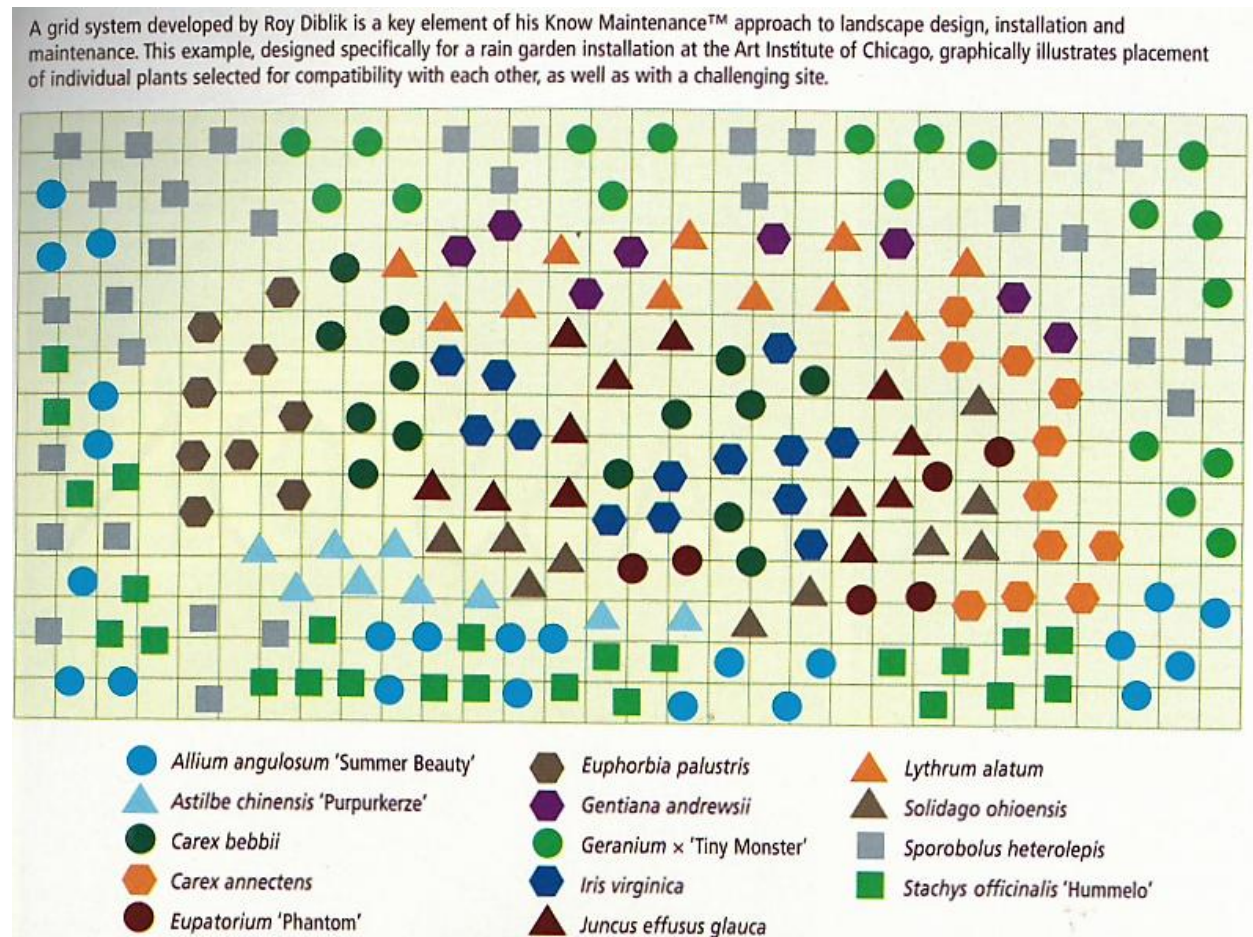
Bulbs: For spring and summer color, Diblik likes to use bulbs that naturalize well. When interplanted with perennials, they add carefree color while they bloom. Later, the foliage of other plants takes over, hiding the bulb foliage as it dies. In fall, areas planted with grasses and bulbs can be weeded with a broadleaf herbicide, he notes.

Integrated action plants: "These plants are the grout that ties the garden together," he explains. Integrated action plants, like *Nepeta racemosa* 'Walker's Low', *Amsonia orientalis* 'Blue Ice', *hemerocallis* and grasses, replace mulch in Diblik's gardens, covering the ground to discourage weeds. They also form the matrix that incorporates parts of the garden into the whole and provides a smooth transition from one planting to the next.

Putting it all together:

"Concepts are fine, but proof is something you can take to the bank. And Diblik's got plenty of examples to prove his concept works beautifully."

He advises residential and commercial clients, as well as works on large public projects, such as those for the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, the Art Institute of Chicago and Olbrich Botanical Gardens in Madison, WI. The Village of Fontana, WI, as well as Grand Geneva Resort & Spa in Lake Geneva, WI, boast naturalistic landscapes designed and installed according to Diblik's Know Maintenance™ system.



Test plots cleverly disguised as display gardens greet wholesale and retail visitors at his Northwind facility in southern Wisconsin. There, visitors can also find helpful pamphlets illustrating the grid system Diblik developed to promote his sustainable garden concept. Diblik has designed a number of grids (above) that provide a handy guide to Know Maintenance™ gardening. Each grid represents a garden unto itself, combining compatible plants and developing a sustainable plant community. And each can be adapted to allow for differences in climate, soil conditions, regional native plants and other variabilities. For the landscape professional working with a small space, an individual grid may fit the bill. Larger sites, however,

can easily be accommodated by adding integrated action plants that weave between multiple grids, uniting discrete plots into a beautiful, sustainable landscape.

Because the grids are designed to combine plants with similar cultural requirements, maintenance - accounting for time and resources - is a known component.

Sustaining beauty. Diblik believes those who earn a living growing plants or designing, planting and maintaining the landscape need to care about creating diverse, sustainable landscapes. Instead of replacing plants over and over, he asks, why not create long-lived plantings that can be enhanced over time?

"We need to start with understanding habitat sustainability and end with knowing the cost to maintain," he explains.

"No-maintenance" landscapes don't really exist, but if Diblik has his way, someday eco-friendly "Know Maintenance™" landscapes will flourish everywhere.

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